

A More of Certainty. Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891) or The Quest for Scientific Connoisseurship

It was in 1868 that Giovanni Morelli made a brief visit to The Hague. He was fifty-two years old at the time, unknown to a general public, and coming back from his first visit to London. One result of this trip was apparently that Morelli took a liking for paintings of Paulus Potter (which makes an interesting pairing). And as to scientific connoisseurship he was looking ahead to the future, since his ideas were still in the making. It was to take him six years more to appear on the scene and to do what a French art historian has called in retrospect: a stirring up of the demons of connoisseurship for a longer time.

Giovanni Morelli's turn to connoisseurship occurred very late in his life and only in the second half of the 19th century. And this century had already seen several developments: historical studies had developed towards a science; archival research had become common, in art historical studies as well; connoisseurs with painter's skills had developed a sense for painterly techniques of the old masters and their materials; and connoisseurship in general had a subjective and intuitive, but also, if informally, a very rational side. To understand Morelli as a connoisseur it is crucial to be aware that he took this whole eclecticism of method that made the attributional studies of his time more or less silently for granted and that he did not mean to replace it, but wanted to carry on with most of its elements (even if he sounded at times more like a revolutionary), and with some new.

Widely considered today as a distant relative of Sherlock Holmes, Morelli seems to represent the *triumph* of rational thinking and minute observation and not respecting pretensions. But the actual reason why he had begun to think about method had been, as he later admitted, his own insecurity. If he passionately strived to enthrone his *own* method this is more the proud showside of a fundamentally sceptical individual who was actually much more concerned to enthrone the aspiration for a *higher level* of certainty in matters of attribution *as such*, whatever strategies it may require. In brief: the whole traditional eclecticism of method was fine – but for a sceptical individual like Morelli it was not enough. There had to be more. A higher level (or quantity) of certainty, to reduce the uneasiness of someone who could be passionately optimistic for moments, but who also never lost his selfdoubts. And this is not a heroic beginning of scientific connoisseurship, but it is the truth. In the beginnings were self doubts, and Morelli's followers, those who really knew him, were occasionally surprised, if not shocked, to hear their revered master belittle his own achievements.

Morelli had, as was widely acknowledged, great qualities as a man. He was most cheerful, cordial, had a strongly developed, waggish sense of humour and was much loved by his friends. And as a connoisseur, one might say, it was probably and paradoxically one of his qualities that he had and admitted doubts, which, as it were, as a driving force constantly did question his certainties and required this higher level, this <more of certainty>.

1) As the first main reason why to come back to Morelli, why to portrait him with eyes of today, I would name the fact that he represents the ambition to speak of connoisseurship in terms of science. This was not new as such, but this speaking had all the implications that the notion of science could have at around 1880, when German speaking art history as an academic discipline was in a phase of reorganisation after the first international congress held at Vienna, and while connoisseurship was rather a practice in and outside – or inbetween – the institutions. And this fragmented, little organised and often intransparent field of practice was suddenly confronted with the idea that there could be a new standard, a new level of certainty attainable, a gold standard, seemingly guaranteed by a new tool, but also a standard, possibly becoming the standard for everyone else, in and outside the institutions, and thus challenging everyone else. The kind of idea to produce all kind of tensions and unrest, and it did stir up the demons of connoisseurship, apart from the question how useful, how reliable or how prone to error this new tool turned out to be.

Now: What exactly did Morelli himself understand by science? How would a Morelli inspired checklist as to what scientific connoisseurship was (or is) about look like?

I would name in the first place, and as to the procedural side of science, that Morelli thought that connoisseurship should be organized as a mutual exchange of rational reasons, based on clear theoretical assumptions (and not as a mere competition of authoritative claims), thus a shift from mere claim to its justification; I would further name the ideal of transparency of method; and at least mention that Morelli thought of the institutional side of science as well, if he envisioned a future science of art that was built on connoisseurship and thereby assigned a fundamental value to attributional skills (instead of seeing the connoisseur as a more or less welcome guest, usually coming from a different social world, to be located somewhere inbetween the institutions). Morelli thought this future science to progress, which might include at least the establishing of an institutionalized culture of self-reflection and an institutionalized memory, in that a science can only progress if knowledge and experience is accumulated and not held exclusive to small circles. And the idea of thinking connoisseurship as a scientific community implies as well the ideal of permanent exchange of information (if

not to use the fashionable term of <open access>). In short: Morelli was not only looking ahead to the future, when briefly visiting The Hague, but generally, and certainly he did consider his project as unfinished and open (while his intellectual heirs tended to either change this project or to consider it as finished by focussing only on pragmatic application). Thus Morelli is representing the very contemporary question to what degree a culture of connoisseurship could or should define itself as a scientific community with clear ideas of rules and standards, be they minimum or maximum standards of quality.

But if Morelli did raise these questions, it does not mean that he presented final answers. A Morelli inspired checklist has its limits and its peculiarities as well. One might ask if a sense of humour does belong to science, and we see Morelli nod and say decidedly <yes>. Thus we have to live with the confusions that his ironies and practical jokes did cause (a delicate thing for a foundational figure, but he *did* enjoy to cause a little confusion here and there).

But speaking of virtues and vices, one should mention above all what is really lacking on this checklist. And this is the criteria or demand of a real systematic representation of knowledge and, above all, its *genesis* – but this is exactly where his mission ended. Not because he would not have accepted this criteria by principle. It is again something very human and rather trivial that Morelli, who did inspire his pupils to speak of system-building and objectivity (words he never used), most deeply hated to be pedantic in a formalistic-systematic way. He simply had no patience, no persistence, no discipline for expertise in form of accurate protocols of certainties and doubts, for oeuvre catalogues or comprehensive histories of painting (his literary genre being the countercatalogue, the counterattack). His pupils did complain, but this did not help. And it's a real irony of history that someone who has become an embodiment of minute observation and rational thinking most deeply hated to be pedantic in a formal way. If Morelli did represent the 19th century of system-building and scientific progress, one might say, he is also representing the 19th century that had no patience to work systems out. And his heritage is not the least a difficult one, just because Morelli did not fully live up to his own ideals, and because he does at the same time represent a new culture and to some degree an old culture, that he meant to renew.

2) A second major and probably the classic reason to come back to Morelli might be the fact that he is representing the ambition to rethink applied stylistic criticism. Be it for the sake of reassessing the pragmatic value of a certain tool or for the sake of reassessing what applied stylistic criticism can do at all: with or without Morelli, digitally equipped or not. Although sceptical Morelli had predicted that his name would be forgotten two years after he had died,

his ideas have found their way into the digital age; and it seems only a matter of time until the Morellian method, this old silk hat from the museum of methods, resurfaces digitally equipped. Hence: It might be useful to briefly point to a few neuralgic points that have always caused or still are causing difficulties and confusions.

What is known as the *Morellian method* can simply be thought of as a recommendation to work with a certain class of visual properties, which Morelli called <characteristic> properties. <Characteristic>, in this respect, had a special meaning which was often more felt than really acknowledged: it meant <exclusively characteristic>, exclusively found in one painter's oeuvre only. And what resulted was a very suggestive logic of, one might say, biometrical suggestiveness, that *seemed* to meet the desire for simplification: if found in a work in question a property could be seen as the ultimate link a certain oeuvre. Property found and problem solved.

A common misunderstanding it is however to think that Morelli thought these properties to be stable and recurring in perfectly identical shape, as it were: in literal repetition. This is not the case, although oversimplified and ideological interpretations have suggested exactly this. But for Morelli it was not about a perfect matching or not matching of characteristics. He worked with the notion of *type*, and the basic operation was to ask, if a shape in question could be interpreted as the realization of a certain type, the type being a mere mental image, derived from a great number of examples. The allknown shapes of hands and ears from the tables in Morelli's books, often misunderstood as precise representations of characteristic properties to match, represent in truth attempts to visualize this type in idealized form and not shapes that one should expect to recur in perfectly identical repetition as stereotypes. Because in reality the type shows variability like a signature and not stability like a fingerprint. The fingerprint metaphor, a hard science inspired language and a repressing of the fact that acts of interpretations are involved – these are all clues for very ideological interpretations of Morelli, much exaggerating his method's validity and therefore its pragmatic worth and thus another demons that Morelli undoubtedly did stir up as well.

A *second* source of misunderstanding bears on a general overlooking how modestly Morelli actually assessed the pragmatic worth of this testing for characteristic properties as a tool: apart from the fact that he did calculate with the possibility that these properties could be copied, he explicitly and repeatedly denied that attributions should rest solely upon this testing, but remained rather unheard. The Morellian method – for Morelli himself, who seemed to consider its suggestive logic as something rather dangerous – was meant to be used in combination with other tools, any tools, and especially one tool that is not exactly generally

associated with Morelli, because, again, he did rather take it for granted: intuition, intuitive judgement and all it involves.

It is a *third* recurring misunderstanding, that results from isolating the Morellian method from the *whole* of Morelli's working methods, to think that Morelli represents a merely objectivistic position. While in truth he is representing an interesting compromise between a subjectivistic and objectivistic position, since at the moment the Morellian tests, this checking for characteristic properties were applied, intuitive assessment had already *been* at work and, as it were, exhausted its limits, but narrowed the field. As a prescientific tool, one might say, but encompassing all that intuition embodies, subjective sensitivity, sense of quality, long experience and memory capacity; a very welcome tool for Morelli to find hypotheses. While the Morellian method was meant primarily as a *testing* aid. Hence intuition and subjectivity Morelli certainly did dethrone, but he did not dismiss them at all (as tradition often, but falsely has it). And this makes again a slight difference of important weight, if it comes to the question of the status of various tools and the question whether to mystify (or even re-enthroned) subjective sensitivity and intuition or not.

All in all Morelli was a rather difficult founding father of method. Eagerly he did observe his various disciples trying to apply his recommendations in practice. Rarely joyfully, in general rather mournfully and melancholy, on the whole: rather silently.

His disciples, on their part, did observe him. And while this whole scenario of mutual observing is not lacking elements of comedy, I would name this the third good reason why to come back to Morelli today: just *because* he left his disciples with numerous alternatives and difficult decisions to make, and forced or invited them to think for themselves. As another analytic tool, a sort of system of coordinates, and also as a general summary I'd like to name some of these alternatives that were to shape the future directions of connoisseurship after Morelli.

3) The probably most basic choice a follower of Morelli had to face, not without an ethical component, was certainly to decide whether to commit oneself to a future science of art and thus for a *collective* enterprise being of *general* interest, or just to focus on the pragmatic usefulness of a certain tool in one's particular and usually short term interest.

This affecting the question whether to think of method as something *ready* to be applied or: as something constantly to develop, to expand and to improve (for example in terms of protocols, especially visual protocols, but also in terms of appropriate language to describe visibility: two problems Morelli was much concerned with during the last years of his life).

Morelli's followers faced choices whether to learn from their master's virtues or vices; whether to listen to his optimistic or to his fundamentally sceptical self, that would suddenly and shockingly declare that maybe «everything was just illusion». Whether to learn from what Morelli *explicitly* did recommend, or from what he rather *silently* did take for granted; whether to become a specialist or rather an eclectic generalist (or at least someone able to cooperate and to organize help if needed).

And to name one fundamental choice that bears on the mentality inherent to applied stylistic criticism as such: whether to re-enthroned intuition as the pivotal tool (and to consider further testing of hypotheses as pointless, at best explanatory and, potentially, as undermining the authority of genius), or – like Morelli and maybe more compatible with contemporary mentalities – to regard intuitive judgement more as a shy beginning of any process to determine authorship and not as its self-opinionated end.

Apart from all these alternatives and many more – to deal with Morelli's ironies was, last but not least, one of the most difficult tasks that whoever wanted to be a Morellian had to face, and I would like to conclude this presentation by giving just one example:

In 1874, six years after visiting The Hague, Morelli heralded a classic era of applied stylistic criticism with a number of provocative essays. But it is striking and maybe surprising that the first of these essays speaks briefly and in passing by also of chemical analysis of painting and this in a very peculiar way. It is one of Morelli's characteristic attacks on the pretentious *other* connoisseur, his favourite enemy, who, in his view, did claim to be capable of chemical analysis of painting just by using his eyes. Morelli, who did witness some of the beginnings of technical art history and who is showing his eclectic side here and obviously is again looking ahead to the future, does not dismiss the chemical test as such. What he says implicitly and unexpectedly is: Ridiculous the kind of chemical analysis that is *done by eye alone*.